

**an overview of**  
THE LIVES & TIMES OF



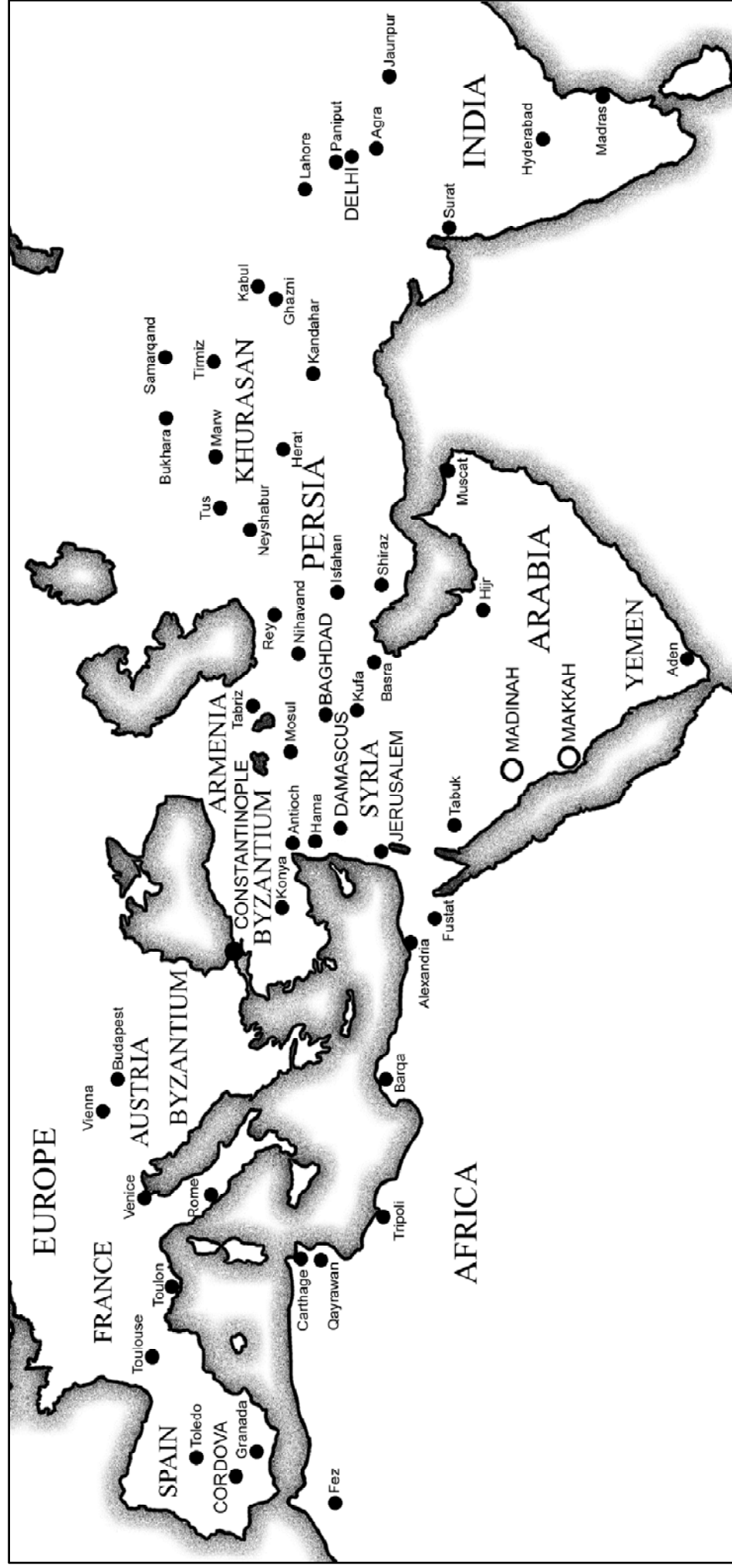
THE FOUR GREAT  
IMAMS



## INTRODUCTION

“...If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislations, empires, peoples and dynasties, but millions of men in two-thirds of the then inhabited world; and more than that, he moved the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and the souls. On the basis of a Book, every letter of which has become law, he created a spiritual nationality which blended together peoples of every tongue and of every race. Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational beliefs, a founder of twenty terrestrial empires and one spiritual empire. Of all standards by which human greatness can be measured, we may well ask ... is there any man greater than Mohammed?...”

Alphonse Lamartine, "Histoire de la Turquie".



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE LIVES AND TIMES OF THE FOUR GREAT IMAMS

By Mawlaanaa FEIZEL CHOTHIA

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Allah declares in the Holy Qur'an :

هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

*“Are those with knowledge equal to those without knowledge?” (Qur'an, 39:9)*

يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

*“Allah will raise the status of those who believe among you and who are given knowledge by degrees.” (Qur'an, 58:11)*

The Blessed Prophet Muhammad [s] spoke in truth :

مَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ بِهِ خَيْرًا يُفَقِّهْهُ فِي الدِّينِ

*“If Allah intends goodness for someone, He gives him (fiqh) understanding of the religion.”*

إِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ وَإِنَّ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ لَمْ يُوْرَثُوا دِينَارًا وَلَا دِرْهَمًا وَرَثَتُوا الْعِلْمَ

*“Verily, the scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets. They do not leave behind gold or silver coins, but rather they leave behind knowledge.”*

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## **FIQH**

The term ‘fiqh’ literally means ‘understanding’. Technically it means the comprehensive understanding and authentic application of the Sharii’ah (Islaamic Law). The aim of the Sharii’ah is to promote human welfare in this world and the hereafter.

The knowledge of Fiqh refers to the compilation and codification of the Laws of Islaam as derived from its four primary sources:

- 1) The Holy Qur’aan
- 2) The Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad [s]
- 3) Ijmaa’ (the Consensus of the Sahaabah, the ‘Ulamaa’ (learned scholars) of Islaam, and the Ummah at large
- 4) Qiyaas (the use of analogical reasoning to deduce new rulings based on the Qur’aan and the Sunnah)

(NB: ‘Urf [Customary practice not in conflict with the primary sources] and Istihsaan [avoiding any rigidity and unfairness in exceptional cases that might result from a literal application of the law] are subsidiary sources of Islaamic law which require a more detailed discussion.)

For example, where an explicit ruling is not found in the Holy Qur’aan, then it is sought in the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad [s], and if not found there then the Ijmaa’ of the Muslims, particularly that of the Sahaabah and ‘Ulamaa’, and lastly, if these three options do not offer a ruling then the final recourse is Qiyaas.

Fiqh defines the responsibilities and daily life of the mukallaf (sane Muslim adult).

Therefore knowledge of Fiqh is necessary for the mukallaf to correctly practice Islaam in his or her sphere of activity (eg. If the mukallaf is a businessman then he would be obligated to acquire the Fiqh of trade and commerce before conducting business).

### **The Development of Fiqh**

The Holy Prophet Muhammad [s] would issue Islaamic rulings during his lifetime, but after his death, the ability to issue rulings required scrupulous knowledge of the Qur’aan and the Sunnah as well as the context in which each ruling was issued by the Prophet [s]. This became increasingly difficult for the new generations of Muslims who had not witnessed the life and practice of the Prophet Muhammad [a] first hand like the Sahaabah (Companions of the Holy Prophet [s]) had.

Furthermore, as time passed and Islaam spread throughout the world new situations arose that needed clear rulings to guide the growing Muslim Ummah.

The ‘Ulamaa’ (learned scholars of Islaam) worked hard to gather and preserve the sayings and practice of the Holy Prophet Muhammad [s] from the Sahaabah, as well as the Prophet’s [s] unique methodology in issuing Islaamic rulings

This arduous task was complex and time-consuming and the ‘Ulamaa’ travelled thousands of miles for months and years on end to compile all this important information.

Of the many ‘Ulamaa’ that emerged as Fiqh experts, four rose to prominence. They became the most influential in the Muslim world because of the comprehensive nature of their compilations of Sharii’ah law and their sophisticated techniques:

- 1) Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh]  
(Nu‘maan ibn Thaabit ibn Zuutaa ibn Marzubaan / 80 - 148 AH [699 – 765 CE] )
- 2) Imaam Maalik [rh]  
(Maalik ibn Anaas ibn Maalik ibn ‘Amr al-Asbahii / 93 - 179 AH [711 - 795 CE] )
- 3) Imaam Shaafi’ii [rh]  
(Muhammad ibn Idriis ash-Shaafi’ii / 150 - 204 AH [767 - 820 CE] )
- 4) Imaam Ahmad ibn Hambal [rh]  
(Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal ash-Shaybaanii / 164 - 241 AH [780 - 855 CE] )

All four of these great Imaams (leaders in Islaamic knowledge and piety) developed advanced methods to preserve the laws and teachings of Islaam from the many sources available to them as handed down by the Sahaabah.

Their means of analysing evidence and its application varied, and sometimes led to diverse interpretations, thus expanding the application of the Prophet’s [s] teachings and practice.

This process produced four unique traditions or schools of Islaamic law which became known as the four Madhaahib (singular : Madh’hab, also spelt Mazh’hab)

The general Muslim population, being less qualified, adhered to one of these four authentic schools of Sharii’ah. Over time, the Hanafii Madh’hab became dominant because of being adopted as the preferred school for political administration and governance by the Khaliif’s of Islaam. This has continued till the present day.

About 70% of the Muslim world adheres to the Hanafii Madh’hab, 20% are Shaafi’ii, 9% Maalikii and 1% Hambalii.

### **Taqliid - Following a Madh’hab**

Ordinary Muslims who do not have specialist knowledge of Fiqh are required to follow one Madh’hab for the following reasons:

- 1) Learning the injunctions of one Madh’hab is easy and within everyone’s capacity.

- 2) Learning one Madh'hab results in less confusion for the ordinary Muslim, whereas keeping track of the injunctions of multiple Madhaahib is very difficult and confusing.
- 3) Following one Madh'hab facilitates uniformity and consistency of practice in society and law.
- 4) Most importantly, following one Madh'hab allows the heart to focus on the essential practical duties of worship and service, instead of theoretical debates on delicate and often irrelevant points of law.

### **Talfiiq - Combining Between Madhaahib**

Each Madh'hab is based on foundational principles (Usuul) from which all the rulings of the Madh'hab are consistently and harmoniously derived.

It is therefore prohibited to pick and choose between Madhaahib merely seeking convenient options based on personal whim and desire, and not out of legitimate necessity. Doing so is impermissible because it leads to contradiction, error and ultimately misguidance. This is known as Talfiiq. Allaah warns against Talfiiq in the following verse of the Qur'aan :

“And do not follow (your) desires, for then you would be led astray from the path of Allaah.”

An example of this is if a Muslim intends to perform Salaah and performs wuduu'. After that, he touches a woman and says to himself, “According to Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], touching a woman does not invalidate the wuduu'.” After that, his nose bleeds, so he says, “According to Imaam Shaafi'ii [rh], bleeding does not invalidate the wuduu'.” Thereafter he proceeds to perform Salaah. Due to the contradictory combination of opinions, his wuduu' and Salaah are not valid according to both Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] and Imaam Shaafi'ii [rh]. This is prohibited and sinful (fisq).

### **Differences between the Madhaahib**

The valid differences of opinion between the Fuqahaa' (Islaamic jurists, legal experts) are a source of mercy for the Muslim Ummah because it allows for a variety of valid legal options (all ultimately derived from the Qur'aan and Sunnah) which in turn gives the Sharii'ah remarkable flexibility without compromising its principles and higher purposes.

Due to the vast multicultural nature of the Muslim Ummah, Muslims worldwide differ in their specific circumstances. That does not only apply on the global and communal level, but even individuals within a single society who may have unique extenuating circumstances.

Had all Muslims been compelled to adhere to only their specific Madh'hab under extremely unusual circumstance, this would have proved unduly difficult for them. Allaah has not placed upon the Ummah of Muhammad [s] any unreasonable or undue difficulty in the practice of Islaam.

Therefore the alternate ruling from another Madh'hab may be more suitable in averting unreasonable hardship, thus fulfilling the higher purposes of Islaam, namely Mercy and facilitating the worship of the Creator of all, Allaah.

That said, no ordinary Muslim should self-prescribe themselves a ruling from another Madh'hab. Instead, they should consult with a qualified specialist in Fiqh. Doing this diminishes the possibility of seeking out rulings for mere convenience and it prevents the well intended Muslim from making avoidable mistakes and incorrect judgments.

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## **The Four Imaams of Fiqh**

### **1) Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh]** **80 - 148 AH [699 - 765 CE]**

The Hanafii Madh'hab (school of Fiqh) was the first of the four great Madhaahib to be established. It was founded by Nu'maan ibn Thaabit ibn Zuutaa ibn Marzubaan, better known by his title Abuu Haniifah (the Father of Sincere Devotion). He was born in Kufa, Iraq, in the year 80AH, 67 years after the death of the Holy Prophet Muhammad [s]. Of Persian/Afghan origin, Abuu Haniifah was brought up in a wealthy Muslim family. His father, Thaabit, a noted businessman and a man of remarkable piety, had the honour of meeting Sayyidunaa 'Alii [r], the fourth Khaliif of Islaam, who prayed for Thaabit and his family. The prayers of Sayyidunaa 'Alii [r] bore fruit in the person of Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh].

Kufa was the provincial capital of Iraq and a commercial center with a culturally diverse population comprising Persian Zoroastrians, Chinese Buddhists, Indian Hindus, Roman Christians, Turkish animists and the ruling Arab and newly converted Muslims. The melting pot that was Kufa left a lasting impact on the young Abuu Haniifah and this impact is reflected in his comprehensive and dynamic Fiqh. While Madiinah was the city of the Holy Prophet [s], the cradle of Islaamic civilization, insulated from the convulsive currents in faraway lands, Kufa was at the very center of the cultural and intellectual turbulence brought on by the mixing of so many diverse nations. The geopolitical as well the cultural contexts of these two cities was very different and this must be kept in mind when comparing the diverse positions of the various schools of Fiqh on specific issues.

Kufa was also a major centre of Islamic learning and intellectual activity at the time. Some of the most distinguished Sahaabah (Companions) of the Prophet [s] such as Khaliif 'Alii ibn Abii Taalib [r] and 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood [r] settled in this city. Abuu Haniifah was very fortunate to have met a number of prominent Sahaabah in his youth, including Anas ibn Maalik [r], Sahl ibn Sa'd [r], 'Aamir ibn Waathilah [r] and Jaabir ibn 'Abdullaah [r] amongst others. Therefore Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] belonged to that pious period of the Tabi'uun, the Successors of the Sahaabah. In fact, it is reported that the Imaam Abuu Haniifah [r] has transmitted hadith from sixteen Sahaabah, namely : Anas ibn Maalik [r], Abdullaah ibn Anis al-Juhani [r], 'Abdullaah ibn al-Harith ibn Juz' al-Zaabidii [r], Jaabir ibn 'Abdullaah [r], Abdullaah ibn Abii Awfaa [r], Waa'ilah ibn al-Asqa' [r], Ma'qal ibn Yasaar [r], Abu



Tufayl ‘Aamir ibn Waathilah [r], ‘Aa’ishah bint Hajrad [r], Sahl ibn Sa’d [r], al-Thaa’ib ibn Khallaad ibn Suwayd [r], Thaa’ib ibn Yaziid ibn Sa’iid [r], Abdullaah ibn Samraa [r], Mahmuud ibn ar-Rabii’ [r], ‘Abdullaah ibn Ja’far [r], and Abuu Umaamah [r].

Like his father, Abuu Haniifah grew up to be a successful merchant, but he soon started taking a deep interest in higher Islaamic education. One day, when Abuu Haniifah was passing by the house of Imaam ash-Sha’bii [rh], an eminent ‘Aalim of the time, the Imaam asked him where he was going. The young Abuu Haniifah replied that he was on his way to meet a certain merchant. Whereupon Imaam ash-Sha’bii [rh] told Abuu Haniifah that he showed signs of intellectual alertness and dynamism and he ought to devote his time to Islaamic studies. These words of advice fired Abuu Haniifah’s enthusiasm, and he began to dedicate all his time and energy to the pursuit of Islaamic knowledge and wisdom.

Inspite of starting his formal Islaamic education much later than his peers, thanks to his indefatigable energy and intellectual brilliance, Abuu Haniifah soon became a prominent Islaamic thinker and jurist. He had the good fortune of learning directly from great luminaries like ash-Sha’bii [rh], Salaamah ibn Kuhayl [rh], A’mash [rh], Hammad [rh] and ‘Amr ibn Murrah [rh], all of whom were based in Kufa at the time. Abuu Haniifah received a thorough education and training in traditional Islaamic sciences including tafsiiir (Qur’aanic exegesis), kalaam (Islaamic theology) and fiqh (Islaamic jurisprudence). In addition, Abuu Haniifah gained proficiency in Arabic grammar, literature, history and genealogy before he proceeded to Basrah where he attended the lectures of great scholars like Qataadah [rh] and Shu’bah [rh], both of whom had learned hadiih directly from the Prophet’s [s] Companions.

Abuu Haniifah’s sharp intellect, coupled with his unflinching dedication to his studies, enabled him to understand and assimilate Islaamic knowledge very rapidly. Increasingly recognised as an esteemed scholar in his own right, Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] could have established his own school and begun to teach, but he decided to study further. Thus he went to Makkah to perform the sacred Hajj (pilgrimage) and during his stay there received advanced training in Fiqh under the tutelage of the leading scholars of Makkah and Madiinah. He enrolled at the school of ‘Ataa ibn Abii Rabaah [rh], who was one of the giants of Islaamic sciences and wisdom at the time and also a student of ‘Abdullaah ibn Umar [r], the distinguished Companion of the Holy Prophet [s].

‘Ataa ibn Abii Rabaah [rh] interviewed Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] about his beliefs before enrolling him and the Imaam’s response was as follows, “My master, I do not speak ill of the Aslaaf (the pious Muslims of earlier generations), nor do I call a sinner a Kaafir, and I believe in Qadr (destiny)”. Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] attended ‘Ataa’s [rh] lectures regularly before refining his knowledge of hadiih and fiqh under the guidance of Ikramah [rh], who was an outstanding pupil of none other than ‘Abdullaah ibn Abbaas [r], the cousin of the Prophet [s].

Imaam Abuu Haniifah [r] then left Makkah for Madiinah where he learned hadiih from Sulaymaan [rh] and Saalim ibn ‘Abdullaah [rh]. Sulaymaan [rh] was an aide of Ummul mu’miniin (the ‘Mother of the believers’) Maymuunah [r], the wife of the Holy Prophet [s], and Saalim [rh] was a grandson of Khaliif ‘Umar ibn al-Khattaab [r]. They were considered to be two of the most learned scholars of Madiinah at the time. Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh]

also studied at the feet of the great great grandsons of the Holy Prophet Muhammad [s], Imaam Baaqir [rh] and Imaam Ja'far as-Saadiq [r] from whom he learned not only Qur'aan, hadiith and fiqh but also knowledge of the subtle and unseen mysteries of Islaam.

It is reported that Imaam Abuu Haniifah [r] learnt Ahaadiith from over four thousand scholars. The reason why the Imaam [rh] attached himself to so many teachers and attended so many schools was that he wanted to acquaint himself with the different principles and methods in vogue so that by a comparative study of them he could enrich his scope and understand that much more.

Having travelled to some of the leading centres of Islaamic learning and having acquired a thorough training in all the branches of Islaamic knowledge under the guidance of the most eminent scholars of his time, Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] became one of the greatest repositories of Islaamic knowledge. His mastery of Islaamic sciences elevated him to a new level within the firmament of Islaamic learning and scholarship and his influence and fame spread throughout the world.

Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] was no hermit nor a pure academic, cloistering himself in a monastery or a masjid. He was a rich man, a successful merchant, a wonderful human being who lived among common folk with the zest and enthusiasm of a believer and contributed to the life of the community that he was a part of. Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] was also a mathematician of the first magnitude and a great city planner, responsible for the planning of the city of Baghdad when it was founded by the 'Abbaasid Khaliif, al-Mansuur.

Although his merit was recognised by his teacher Hammaad [rh], and inspite of now becoming a Mujtahid (an independent authority in Islaamic law) in his own right, Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] refrained from establishing a school of jurisprudence (madh'hab) of his own even though he was now forty years of age. As long as his mentor Hammad [rh] lived, Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] respectfully adhered to his school and never even stretched his feet towards the house of Hammaad [rh] out of respect for him. When Hammaad [rh] died in 120 AH, Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] was offered his position which he reluctantly accepted after much persuasion. From this point onwards people from all over the world flocked to his religious discourses, so much so that his fame far exceeded that of even the rulers of his time.

Imaam Abuu Haniifah's [rh] grasp of Islaam was rigorous, comprehensive and authentic, and as an Islaamic thinker and pioneer of Islaamic legal thought, he was without equal. An undisputed master of legal theory and jurisprudence, he was able to bridge gaps which others struggled event to see. The vast corpus of juristic pronouncements (fataawaa) developed by Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] and his trusted disciples, which numbered no less than forty specialists on every legal issue, became so large that, over time, a school of Islaamic legal thought emerged named after him. Known as the Hanafii Madh'hab, this school of Islaamic legal thought is today the Muslim world's most widely followed madh'hab and, in fact, the most popular and influential code of legal practice in human history. Pioneered by Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] and his distinguished pupils such as Abuu Yuusuf Ya'quub ibn Ibraahiim [rh], Muhammad ibn al-Hasan ash-Shaybaanii [rh] and Zufar ibn al-Hudhayl [rh], this school

of legal thought is most prevalent in Central Asia and China, South Asia, the Middle East, Turkey and Eastern Europe, and Egypt.

Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] was not only a highly respected scholar but he was also outspoken in championing truth and justice. He did not hesitate to criticize even the powerful Khaliif's of his age when they fell short of the high moral standards expected of Islaamic rulership. It is true that he always strove to ensure that unity was maintained amongst the Muslims, but in no way was he prepared to ever compromise Islaamic principles and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad [s].

Given that Islaam was the dominant intellectual force of the time and that every group attempted to justify their cause in the name of Islaam, Imaam Abuu Haniifah's [rh] prestige and influence as an Islaamic authority were certainly of concern to both the Umayyad as well the subsequent Abbaasid rulers.

In 132 AH the Umayyad dynasty was overthrown by the 'Abbaasids. Upon coming to power, the 'Abbaasid Khaliifs embarked on a campaign of extermination of all political rivals, which unfortunately extended even to members of the blessed Prophet Muhammad's [s] direct descendants who were critical of them. In 145 AH the followers of Muhammad Nafs Zakiyyah [rh] took up arms against the 'Abbaasid Khaliif Mansuur and eventually died fighting against the Khaliif's forces. His brother Ibraahiim [rh] continued the fight after him.

The 'Ulamaa' always worked towards unity and reconciliation amongst Muslims and did not join any of the contesting parties, but that did not deter them from speaking out against wrongdoing and injustice. Even though Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] had pledged allegiance to the 'Abbaasids, he sympathized with Ibraahiim [rh] because his criticism of the 'Abbaasid Khaliif's falling short of the high moral standards expected of Islaamic rulership was true. Later when Ibraahiim [rh] was overpowered by the Khaliif's forces in 146 AH, al-Mansuur began to arrest those who sympathized with Ibraahiim [rh], one of whom was Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh]. But when the Imaam [rh] was brought to the court, the courtiers immediately recognised him and respectfully presented the Imaam [rh] to Khaliif al-Mansuur, reminding him, "This man is the greatest 'Aalim of Islaam alive today and must be treated with special courtesy."

The Khaliif certainly respected Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh]. He knew the Imaam [rh] to be an uncompromising, reliable, generous scholar to whom people flocked because of his knowledge, excellence, wisdom, true guidance and fear of Allaah. There was no action the Khaliif could take against Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] because the Imaam never revolted against the institution of Khilaafah. He understood that the Imaam's criticism was against the individual failings of the political leaders. But the subversive retinue around Khaliif al-Mansuur provoked him against the Imaam and insisted that the Khaliif needed to contain Imaam Abuu Hannifah's [rh] influence. The Khaliif decided to offer him the position of Qaadii (Chief Justice) of Baghdad calculating that by offering the Imaam [rh] such a necessary duty which would benefit the general public and which could not be refused, the Imaam [rh] could thus be brought under his control. But the great 'Ulamaa' and Saalihiin

(pious people) of Islaam have, throughout the ages, refused the favours of men of power and wealth in order to retain their independence and, in so doing, selflessly serve Islaam.

Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] declined the offer. Khaliif al-Mansuur was furious that his offer was spurned and he suspected that it implied opposition to his authority. The Khaliif had the Imaam [rh] imprisoned and flogged to compel him to accept the position of Chief Justice. The Imaam [rh] was taken out each day and lashed until he had received 110 lashes. In spite of these tortures, Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] never yielded to the Khaliif's coercion nor did he renounce his allegiance to the Khaliif even though he considered others to be more worthy of the position of Khilaafah, especially leading members of the Ahl-ul-Bayt (Prophet's [s] family). But the Imaam [rh] never trusted those opportunistic forces who claimed to support the Ahl-ul-Bayt, as history so often proved true. So in spite of his deep love for the Ahl-ul-Bayt, the unity and stability of the Islaamic public order always outweighed all other considerations.

The Imaam's [rh] reputation as a scholar and man of piety compelled Khaliif al-Mansuur to allow him to teach even in prison. Imaam Muhammad ibn al-Hasan ash-Shaybaanii [rh], the famous disciple of Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], was in fact tutored while the Imaam [rh] was in prison. Thousands more still flocked to listen to Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] and study at his feet. The enemies of Islaam saw an opportunity to sow discord amongst the Muslims and planned to poison Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] while still in custody, so laying blame on the Khaliif for his death. In this way they hoped to cause civil strife within the Ummah.

Fortunately Khaliif al-Mansuur did not want to appear to be an enemy of knowledge and an oppressor of scholars. When events forced him to curtail Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], he produced a justification which had an adequate logical basis, namely to force him to act as Qadii and thus support his rule. He did not punish the Imaam [rh] out of simple malice. When this failed to produce a satisfactory result, the Khaliif did not insist on it. After the Imaam [rh] was imprisoned for a time, Khaliif al-Mansuur had him released on the basis that he would stay at home and issue Fataawaa (rulings) regarding the judgements presented to him, including such fataawaa that expanded the Khaliif's authority. But again the great Imaam [rh] refused to issue a single fatwah or even to hold audience with people, thus asserting his autonomy and independence from the rulers. But by now the effects of the poison administered by the hidden hands of enemies, the munaafiqun (hypocrites) who had always plagued Islaam from its inception, took its toll.

In the month of Rajab 150 AH the great Imaam, Abuu Haniifah, Nu'maan bin Thaabit [rh], passed away in Baghdad due to the effect of poison while performing his Salaah. He died the death of a true 'Aalim (scholar) and Shahiid (martyr). The Janaazah Salaah (funeral prayer) was performed six times, and each time fifty thousand people took part in the prayers. Even the Khaliif al-Mansuur prayed over his grave and ordered that he himself should one day be buried beside Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh]. After his burial, for twenty days people from all over the world kept on coming to perform the funeral prayers over his grave.

In 459 AH a mausoleum was built on his tomb by the great Seljuq Sultaan, Alp Arslaan, as well a large Madrasah in his honour. This beautiful structure was destroyed by the Shii'ah

Safawiy (Safavid) dynasty but later restored by the great Uthmaaniy (Ottoman) Khaliif, Sultaan Sulaymaan the Magnificent, which stands to this day.

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2) **Imaam Maalik** [rh]  
93 - 179 AH [711 - 795 CE]

Because Islaam is not only a religion but also a complete way of life, the Holy Qur'aan and the Sunnah (normative practice of the Holy Prophet Muhammad [s]) provide detailed and comprehensive guidance for Muslims, covering every sphere of their life. After preaching and propagating Islaam in Makkah for more than a decade, the Prophet [s] migrated to Madiinah in 622 CE and devoted the next decade of his life to transforming that Arabian oasis into a fully-fledged Islaamic society. The Prophet [s] not only imparted Islaamic knowledge to the people of Madiinah, he also developed the social, political, economic and legal apparatus of that society in the light of the Divine revelation, and in so doing he established the first Islaamic system of government in history. From that day on, Madiinah became the model Islaamic society, a shining example of what a Muslim state ought to be like. Ever since then, Muslims have continued to admire, study and analyse the key features and characteristics of that early Madinian society as established by the Holy Prophet [s] himself. Probably more than anyone else, one man played a pivotal role in recording the norms and culture of that society; he was Imaam Maalik ibn Anas [rh].

Abuu Abdullaah, Maalik ibn Anas ibn Maalik ibn Abii Aamir al-Asbahii, known as Imaam Maalik [rh], was born in Madiinah during the reign of the Umayyad Khaliif al-Waliid ibn Abd-ul-Malik. Hailing from the Yemeni province of Himyar, Maalik's grandfather came to Madiinah and settled there with his family during the reign of Khaliif 'Umar [r]. Living during the early days of Islaam, his grandfather and father acquired a thorough education in Islaam under the supervision of the Prophet's [s] Companions (Sahaabah). Young Maalik was thus brought up in a deeply religious environment, where everyone lived their lives in accordance with the Prophetic norms and practices. After memorising the whole Qur'aan, he received instruction in Arabic grammar and traditional Islaamic teachings at home. He then acquired a thorough familiarisation with the fundamentals of Islaam under the supervision of his learned father, Anas, and uncle, Rabii'. Being very studious, he preferred to occupy himself with his studies rather than pursue a career in trade or commerce. Such was his thirst for knowledge and education that, even as a child, he chose to stay at home and study, rather than go out and play games with other children. His love for learning remained with him for the rest of his life, as he went on to become one of the Muslim world's most celebrated scholar.

As a gifted student, he excelled in his studies and outshone his peers. Though Damascus was the political capital of the Islaamic world at the time, Madiinah remained the hub of Islaamic learning and scholarship by virtue of the fact that it was the city of the Prophet [s] (Madiinat-un-Nabii), and the first civic capital of the Khilaafah. Brought up and educated in this blessed city, Maalik developed instant affinity with the normative practice of the Prophet [s]. Not surprisingly, the study of Prophetic hadiih became his favourite preoccupation in life.

Since his uncle Abu Suhayl, an-Naafi' [rh] was an eminent authority on hadith literature, Maalik began to study this and other related subjects under his guidance. Naafi' [rh] was fortunate to have studied Islaamic sciences, especially hadith, directly under the supervision of Sayyidatunnaa 'Aa'ishah [r], the Prophet's [s] beloved wife, and famous companions like Abuu Hurayrah [r] and Abdullaah ibn 'Umar [r]. Maalik sat at the feet of Naafi' [rh] and studied the Islaamic sciences in a thoroughly systematic way. Other outstanding students of an-Naafi' [rh] included az-Zuhri [rh], al-Awzaa'ii [rh] and Ibn Jariir [rh], but it was the precocious Maalik who was destined to outshine all of them on account of his unrivalled mastery of the Prophetic hadith.

Maalik may have been gifted, but he was equally selfless and hardworking. He made it a rule for himself to visit his teachers in their homes and wait as long as it was necessary for them to come out of their houses and teach him. Adverse weather and difficult terrain notwithstanding, he always insisted on visiting all the luminaries of Madiinah including Muhammad ibn Yahyaa al-Ansaarii [rh], Abu Haazim Salmah ibn Dinaar [rh] and Yahya ibn Sa'iid [rh] in order to learn hadith from them. Thus he spent considerable sums of money, endured physical hardship and experienced many personal difficulties in his quest for Prophetic hadith.

After completing his formal study of tafsir (Qur'aanic exegesis), fiqh (jurisprudence) and hadith, Maalik began to attend the class of Rabii'ah ibn Abd ar-Rahman [rh] and Sa'iid ibn Musayyib [rh], two of the greatest Islaamic scholars of their generation. As a passionate exponent of qualified independent reason in juristic matters (ijtihaad), Rabii'ah [rh] argued that the ability to exercise scholarly discretion was a necessary pre-requisite for a correct understanding and application of Islaamic ideals at a practical level. Thus he did not hesitate to exercise independent scholarly discretion (ijtihaad) where he felt it was appropriate to do so. Although the directive for such an interpretative methodology already existed in the Qur'aan and the Hadith, many scholars were reluctant to exercise their own discretion until Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] emerged to develop the methodology in a rigorous and systematic manner, thus making it a key feature of Hanafii legal thought.

Keen to master the art of ijtihaad, Maalik attended Rabii'ah's [rh] lectures and became highly proficient in exercising intellectual discretion. The need for such an interpretive approach to the revealed sources of Islaam, the Qur'aan and Hadith, was appreciated as soon as the Muslims began to encounter new challenges during the rapid expansion of the Islaamic world following the death of the Prophet [s] in 632. Faced with new challenges and difficulties, the early scholars of Islaam approached the Divine revelation and Prophetic hadith with analytical minds in order to derive guidance from them in providing Islaamic answers to the novel problems of their time.

Not content with what he had learned so far, Maalik then mastered hadith under Hishaam ibn Urwah [rh], 'Abd ur-Rahmaan ibn Hurmuz [rh] and Sa'iid ibn Musayyib [rh]. Despite being a prominent Taabi'iy (Successor) of the Prophet's [s] Companions and an eminent authority on hadith, Sa'iid [rh] was so impressed with Maalik's knowledge of hadith that he formally authorised him to teach. Imaam Maalik [rh] then attended Ja'far al-Saadiq's [rh]

lectures on the Qur'aan, hadiith and fiqh at the Masjid an-Nabawii. As well as being a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad [s], Ja'far [rh] was a great Islaamic scholar and sage of his time. Imaam Maalik [rh] studied under Ja'far's [rh] tutelage and the latter was also deeply impressed with his vast knowledge.

The rise of both political and theological differences within the early Muslim community prompted Imaam Maalik [rh] to familiarise himself with the views of all these sects and groups, and become a champion of normative Islaam (Ahl us-Sunnah wal-Jamaa'ah). By the time Imaam Maalik [rh] reached his fortieth birthday, he was already widely recognised as an eminent Islaamic scholar and jurist throughout Madiinah, not least because more than seventy distinguished scholars of tafsir and hadiith had authorised him to teach the Islaamic sciences.

Since he was also a strict adherent of the Prophetic sunnah and the pious practice ('amal) of the people of Madiinah, he cared little about the wealth and luxuries of this world. Indeed, he chose to live in virtual poverty, far removed from the wealth and pleasures of this life. As expected, his piety, simplicity and asceticism (zuhd) elevated his standing in Madiinah and earned him the admiration and love of all. His integrity, sincerity and unusual grasp of Islaamic teachings and practices, coupled with his photographic memory and intellectual brilliance, made him a popular figure not only in Madiinah but also across the Islaamic world.

After the death of his beloved teacher Rabii'ah [rh] in 755, Imaam Maalik [rh] came to be regarded as Madiinah's most learned scholar. And since there was no better place to start teaching than in the Prophet's [s] own masjid, Imaam Maalik [rh] began to deliver daily lectures on hadiith and fiqh in the Masjid un-Nabawii. Being a polite and friendly teacher, he always encouraged his students to ask questions and he, in turn, also provided reasoned and straightforward answers. People often tested his knowledge of Islaam by posing difficult political and theological questions regarding the behaviour of the city's ruling elites. But the Imaam [rh] despised schism and strife and he always responded to such questions in a measured, relevant and succinct way.

Imaam Maalik's [rh] lectures at the Masjid un-Nabawii became so popular that thousands of students came from all over the Muslim world to hear him speak. Some of his famous students included Imaam ash-Shafi'ii [rh], Imaam Abuu Yuusuf [rh], Imaam Muhammad ibn ul-Hasan ash-Shaybaanii [rh] and 'Abdullaah ibn Mubaarak [rh]. Even Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], in spite of being thirteen years his senior, attended his lectures and they regarded it as an honour to be students and teachers of each other. The 'Abbaasid Khaliifs, al-Mansuur, al-Mahdii and Haaruun ar-Rashiid and his young sons, al-Amiin and al-Ma'muun, who later became Khaliifs, had also attended Imaam Maalik's lectures.

Like Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], Imaam Maalik [rh] was thoroughly acquainted with the methods of ijtihaad (scholarly discretion), and also considered Islaamic teachings to be completely in harmony with human reason and logic. However, unlike Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], he regarded the norms and practice of Madinian society to be a fundamental source for the interpretation of Islaamic teachings. Shaped by the Prophet [s] in the light of

Divine guidance, the customs (‘urf) and practices (‘amal) of the people of Madiinah, therefore, became an important component of Imaam Maalik’s [rh] legal theory and methodology.

In addition to this, his famous Kitaab al-Muwatta’ (The Book of the Well-trodden Path), composed at the behest of the ‘Abbaasid Khaliif al-Mansuur, became one of the first and most important comprehensive anthologies of hadiith ever produced. After carefully examining and scrutinising a large quantity of Prophetic traditions (hadiith), he compiled around one thousand legally-orientated ahaadiith into one book. He supplemented the hadiith with the views and opinions of the Prophet’s [s] Companions, followed by the customs and practices of the people of Madiinah, along with his own views and opinions on the issues concerned.

Upon completion, this book became an instant success. It became so popular across the Muslim world that, on one occasion, Khaliif Haaruun ar-Rashiid asked Imaam Maalik [rh] for his permission to make his book the law of the land. But, being a wise scholar, he told the Khaliif that it would be inappropriate to limit Islaam and Muslims to one particular interpretation of Islaamic law only.

This pioneering work later inspired generations of Islaamic scholars like Imaam al-Bukhaarii [rh], Imaam Muslim [rh], Imaam Abuu Daawuud [rh], Imaam at-Tirmidhii [rh] and others to compile their own voluminous collections of hadiith. In fact the Muwatta’ of Imaam Maalik [rh] is rated even higher than the famous Hadiith compilations of Sahiih al-Bukhaarii and Sahiih Muslim on account of its authenticity as a book of Islaamic teachings and practices.

Imaam Maalik [rh] was not only a great scholar of hadiith, fiqh and theology, he was also a fearless defender of Islaam, both against its enemies as well as its adherents who had gone astray, especially the rebellious factions that arose in his time. Imaam Maalik [rh] saw that those who rebelled against the rulers were no more just than those whom they rebelled against and that rebellion entailed nothing more than chaos, loss of life, and injustice.

Through all the turmoil and upheavals of his age, Imaam Maalik [rh] clung to the community and championed unity. He insisted that Muslims should always obey their Khaliifs and never rebel against them. Having said that he did not call people to uncritically support the governors and Khaliifs in everything that they did. He sought to remain neutral and did not rally people to anyone when rebellion or unrest occurred, this in accordance with the Prophetic advice, “When the swords of Muslims clash, then withdraw from both parties (ie. be neutral).” If any Khaliif was guilty of wrongdoing, Imaam Maalik’s [rh] resistance to that was achieved through admonition and speaking truth to those in power. He insisted that it was the noble task of the ‘Ulamaa’ (scholars of Islaam) to teach the rulers, not rebel against them.

Although Imaam Maalik [rh] kept himself apart from all rebellious movements and sedition, he was nevertheless embroiled in a political controversy in 147 AH, during the reign of the ‘Abbaasid Khaliif, al-Mansuur, which caused him to be imprisoned and brutally whipped. During this ordeal his arms were racked to the point that his shoulders were dislocated.



The punishment meted out to Imaam Maalik [rh] was on account of his recounting the hadith, “There is no divorce for anyone who is compelled.” Some provocateurs involved in the rebellion against the ‘Abbaasid Khilaafah mischievously claimed this as proof of the invalidity of oaths of allegiance made to Khaliif al-Mansuur under duress. Al-Mansuur forbade Imaam Maalik [rh] to relate the hadith for fear of encouraging rebellion, but some munaafiquun (hypocrites) enticed the Imaam into relating it under a false pretext. While the sincere scholars transmitted it from him, the enemies of Islaam and their unwitting followers used this hadith to renounce their allegiance to the Khaliif claiming that it was only given under duress, and thus attempted to invalidate the Khilaafah altogether. By relating this hadith they also endeavoured to depict Imaam Maalik [rh] as a rebel and so give credibility to their rebellious movements.

Not understanding the extent of the conspiracy, the governor of Madiinah, Ja‘far ibn Sulaymaan arrested the Imaam [rh] without the knowledge of the Khaliif and had him imprisoned and punished. When the people of Madiinah saw their Imaam being subjected to this unjust punishment they were incensed against the ‘Abbaasid Khaliif and his governor. The conspiracy seemed to be working in pitting the Muslims against their Khaliif, but Imaam Maalik [rh] immediately understood the insidious plan and forbade his followers to rebel.

The matter was brought to the attention of Khaliif al-Mansuur who regretted what had been done by the governor and had him immediately dismissed. The Khaliif personally travelled to Madiinah to apologise to Imaam Maalik [r] for the injustice he was made to endure.

Like Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], Imaam Maalik [rh] certainly did not think that the Khaliifs of his time were conducting themselves according to the high moral standards expected of Islaamic rulership, but neither did he consider it permissible to remove them by force, because the result of civil strife was inevitably corruption, disorder and bloodshed which always afflict the innocent first. He therefore considered it his duty to guide the rulers and reform them. That is why he used to visit the Khaliifs and Amiirs (political authorities) and admonish them, calling them back to the Sunnah of the blessed Prophet Muhammad [s]. He used to say, “It is the duty of every Muslim in whose chest Allaah has placed the knowledge of Islaam to go to those in power and to command them to do what is right and forbid them from doing what is wrong...” . One of his students asked, “But people criticise you for visiting the rulers who men of learning should avoid.” The Imaam [rh] replied, “That is a burden I place on myself, because if I do not advise them then they might consult those who may lead them astray.”

Imaam Maalik [rh] died in Madiinah at the advanced age of eighty-five and was buried in the city’s famous cemetery, Jannat ul-Baqii. Named after Imaam Maalik [rh], the Maaliki Madh’hab later emerged and spread across the Muslim world. Today the adherents of his Madh’hab are to be found mainly in North and West Africa, Egypt and north eastern Arabia.

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### 3) **Imaam Shaafi’ii [rh]**

If Sharii'ah (Islaamic law) is a vast and complex subject, then the Principles which govern the Sharii'ah or 'Usuul ul-Fiqh is even more complex and sophisticated. And although the Qur'aan and Sunnah (the normative practice of the Holy Prophet Muhammad [s] ) are the two fundamental sources of Islaamic jurisprudence, how these two sources should be analysed, interpreted and implemented in a constantly changing and expanding Islaamic society soon occupied the minds of the early Islaamic scholars ('Ulamaa') and jurists (Fuqahaa').

Following the death of the Holy Prophet [s], the Islaamic territories continued to grow rapidly, and new challenges began to confront the early Muslim community. This prompted scores of prominent Islaamic scholars to carry out a systematic study of the Qur'aan and the Prophetic Hadiith, and in so doing they developed Usuul ul-Fiqh in order to facilitate the coherent derivation of rulings from the Qur'aan and Hadiith.

It is true that Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], assisted by his talented students like Abuu Yuusuf [rh], Muhammad ash-Shaybaanii [rh] and Zufar [rh], pioneered Islaamic legal methodology and introduced its overarching principles in a coherent manner. But it was Muhammad ash-Shaybaanii's [rh] student, Imaam as-Shaafi'ii [rh], who advanced the science of the Principles which govern the Sharii'ah and he is widely considered to be the 'father of Usuul ul-Fiqh'.

Muhammad ibn Idriis ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] was of Qurayshii ancestry and was born in the city of Gaza in southern Palestine. His family were direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's [s] great grandfather, 'Abd Manaaf. He grew up in Palestine and received elementary education in Arabic language and grammar, and committed the entire Qur'aan to memory before he was seven. When ash-Shaafi'i was still young, his father died and this prompted his mother to migrate to their ancestral home in Makkah, where members of their family and close relatives lived at the time. He then received further training in Arabic grammar, literature and history, and also became proficient at archery.

Here ash-Shaafi'ii and his mother were forced to endure considerable personal and financial hardship but, despite their abject poverty, his devout mother was keen to give her son a good start in life by continuing with his Islaamic education.

From the outset, ash-Shaafi'ii's prodigious memory and sharp intellect endeared him to his teachers. He could commit large collections of hadiih to memory with ease. Since Imaam Maalik's [rh] book, al-Muwatta', was a popular religious text at the time, all the brightest students of Islaamic sciences were expected to learn it by heart. He consequently memorised this anthology of Prophetic traditions in its entirety before he was fifteen years old. He mastered this book so well that he was considered to be a great authority on the religious thought of Imaam Maalik [rh].

Ash-Shaafi'i then studied fiqh (Islaamic jurisprudence) under the guidance of Sufyaan ibn 'Uyaynaa [rh] and Muslim ibn Khaalid az-Zanjii [rh], both of whom were respected jurists of

their time. Impressed with ash-Shaafi'ii's intellectual abilities, the governor of Makkah then personally wrote a letter to his counterpart in Madiinah to request that Imaam Maalik [rh], the compiler of al-Muwatta', should teach ash-Shaafi'ii. In Madiinah, he devoted all his time and energy to the pursuit of hadith and fiqh, and studied the Muwatta' under Imaam Maalik's [rh] personal supervision.

Some of Imaam Maalik's [rh] eminent students at the time included scholars like Imaam Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybaanii [rh], who came all the way from Iraq to attend Imaam Maalik's [rh] lectures. Although ash-Shaafi'ii was happy to be in the company of such an illustrious group of Islaamic legal minds, on a more personal level, he began to experience considerable hardship at the time. Unlike the other students, he had no one to support him financially but, given his intellectual brilliance, Imaam Maalik [rh] offered him a regular stipend which enabled him to complete his advanced education. His stay in Madiinah proved so productive that Imaam Maalik [rh] subsequently asked him to become his teaching assistant. By the time Imaam Maalik [rh] died in 795 CE, ash-Shaafi'ii had already become recognised throughout Madiinah as an eminent Islaamic scholar and jurist.

Deeply saddened by Imaam Maalik's [rh] death, he soon left Madiinah and returned to his native Makkah. Here Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii's [rh] reputation spread across the Hijaz on account of his vast knowledge of Islaamic sciences. On one occasion, when the governor of Yemen happened to be in Makkah, he was informed about Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii's [rh] intellectual abilities and legal expertise. This prompted the governor to approach Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] and invite him to accompany him to Yemen, where he promised to make him the Chief Justice of the city of Najraan.

The tall, slim and always neatly dressed Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] accepted the offer and moved to Yemen at the age of thirty one. However, his transition from the world of academia to the murky and uncertain world of politics and diplomacy did not go according to plan. As a gifted jurist and Islaamic scholar, he was not only scrupulously clean, honest and trustworthy, he was also determined to uphold the truth and administer justice fairly and equitably, but his strict and uncompromising application of Islaamic law did not go down too well with some of those in power.

Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] continued to apply Islaamic law without any fear or favouritism. This eventually brought him into direct conflict with the governor who expected scholars to endorse his own views. Keen to have him dismissed, the governor falsely accused Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] of sympathising with a rebellious Shii'ah faction which was bitterly opposed to the Abbaasid Khaliif, Haaruun ar-Rashiid.

Though the charge of treason levelled against Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] was both false and unsubstantiated, he was found guilty of harbouring the rebellious Shii'ahs. Chained from head to toe by the authorities in Najraan, he was deported to the highest Abbaasid court in Baghdad in 803 CE.

The thirty-six year old Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] was summoned by Khaliif Haaruun al-Rashiid to appear before him, along with the other alleged conspirators to answer the

charges. Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] eloquently refuted all the false charges levelled against him. Khaliif Haaruun ar-Rashiid was so impressed with Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii's [rh] vast erudition and logical arguments that he engaged him in debate and discussion for a long period of time. They discussed the finer points of Islaamic theology, jurisprudence, logic and even aspects of Greek thought. As a great patron of learning and scholarship, the Khaliif deeply admired Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii's [rh] intellectual brilliance. At the time, Imaam Muhammad ash-Shaybaanii [rh], the famous Hanafii jurist, was the Chief Justice of Baghdad and he vouched for Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] to the Khaliif and requested that he set Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] free. The Khaliif not only set Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] free, he also requested that Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] stay in Baghdad and help him promote learning and scholarship throughout the vast Islaamic lands.

Relieved to have been spared, Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] settled in Baghdaad and vowed never to become a government official again. Instead, he resumed his career as an academic and researcher in Islaamic sciences, for that was his real passion. In Baghdad he conducted advanced research in fiqh and hadiith under the guidance of Imaam Muhammad ash-Shaybaanii [rh] and other leading scholars. Being one of the foremost students of Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], Imaam Muhammad ash-Shaybaanii [rh] was considered to be one of the greatest scholars of Islaam at the time and an eminent authority on Islaamic law. Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] learned Hanafii jurisprudence under his guidance and became highly proficient in the legal thought of this school.

In the course of his discussions and debates with the leading Hanafii scholars, Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] emphasised the primacy of hadiith in the formulation of Islaamic legal principles and practices. He felt qiyaas (analogical deduction) played a far greater role within the Hanafii legal methodology than was necessary. Not surprisingly, he emerged from his discussions with the Hanafii's as a great champion of a more literalist application of Prophetic hadith. That is not to say, however, that the Hanafii scholars did not uphold the hadiith. On the contrary, the Hanafii's zealously adhered to the hadiith but, unlike the Maalikii's and Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] himself, they placed greater emphasis on the need to rationally synthesize the many seemingly disparate ahaadiith with the prevailing circumstances and make the Sharii'ah as practical as possible.

Nevertheless, it is very true that Hanafii legal thought is characterised by its considerable reliance on the rational construction and deduction of rulings and principles from the scriptural sources of Islaam, namely the Qur'aan and Sunnah of the the Holy Prophet [s]. Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] was acutely aware of this and he deliberately engaged the Hanafii scholars in debates and discussion on the finer points of their legal thought, and in so doing he successfully mastered the legal thought of both Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] and Imaam Maalik [rh]. This was a remarkable achievement for Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] who was now able to analyse, refine and even critique the legal thought of two of the Muslim world's most influential jurists. And although Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] rightly considered Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] to be the father of Islaamic legal thought and Imaam Maalik [rh] to be the greatest authority on hadiith, he knew that the science of the principles which underpin Islaamic jurisprudence had to be fully developed and codified for the benefit of posterity.

Of course, he knew this would not be an easy task, but he was more than qualified to undertake this challenging, but important, work. His success in this earned him a unique place in the intellectual history of Islaam, as the first systematic formulator of the science of ‘Usool ul-Fiqh (the Principles of Islaamic Jurisprudence).

In 804 CE Imaam ash-Shaafi’ii [rh] left Baghdad and moved to Syria, and from there he went to Makkah where he began to deliver regular lectures on fiqh and hadiith at the al-Haram ush-Shariif (the Sacred Mosque). Hundreds of students, including the famous Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh], travelled from across the Muslim world to attend his inspiring talks on all aspects of Islaam. Influenced by the Hanafii scholars of Baghdad, Imaam ash-Shaafi’ii [rh] changed his views on certain aspects of Maalikii legal thought during this period, even though he continued to hold Imaam Maalik [rh] and his famous al-Muwatta’ in very high regard.

After six years of teaching and travelling across Syria and Arabia, Imaam ash-Shaafi’ii [rh] returned to Baghdad in 810 CE to find al-Ma’mun, the son and successor of Khaliif Haaruun ar-Rashid, on the Abbaasid throne. Al-Ma’mun immediately invited Imaam ash-Shaafi’ii [rh] to become the Chief Justice (Qaadiy ul-Qudaat) of Baghdad but, given his previous bad experience in Najraan, the latter politely turned down the offer. Moreover, since Khaliif al-Ma’mun was a champion of the heretical Mu’tazilite creed, Imaam ash-Shaafi’ii [rh] - like the other prominent ‘Ulamaa’ of the time - considered him to be a wrongdoer in this respect and deviated from the true path.

Not wanting to give the Khaliif any credibility by associating with him, Imaam ash-Shaafi’ii [rh] quietly left Baghdad in 814 CE and proceeded to Egypt. At the time, Egypt was a very peaceful and intellectually conducive place. Here he came into contact with scores of renowned Islaamic scholars and jurists, including Rabii’ ibn Sulaymaan al-Mar’alii [rh] and Abuu Ibrahiim ibn Yahyaa al-Muzanii [rh]. He frequently engaged in discussion and debate with these scholars on different aspects of fiqh and hadiith, which further polished and refined his own ideas and thoughts on these subjects.

Convinced that he had fully grasped the complexities and intricacies of Islaamic jurisprudence, Imaam ash-Shaafi’ii [rh] then sat down to formulate a systematic and coherent theory of Islaamic legal thought. He took into consideration the views of the Hanafis as well as the Malikiis and in so doing he presented a comprehensive but, equally refreshing, exposition of Islaamic legal principles in order to address the new challenges of his time.

Imaam ash-Shaafi’ii [rh] recorded his ideas and thoughts in his celebrated book Kitaab ul-Umm (The Book of Essence) and ar-Risaalah (The Treatise). In these two books, he systematically formulated the fundamental principles of the science of Islaamic jurisprudence (‘Usool ul-Fiqh), and created a new, comprehensive and original legal synthesis.

He was so successful in his task that a Madh’hab (school of legal thought) subsequently emerged based on his legal theory and spread across the Muslim world. Today, the Shaafi’ii Madh’hab is the second most popular school of Islaamic law which is widely followed in Egypt, Yemen, South East Asia and parts of East Africa.

Blessed with a prodigious memory and remarkably sharp intellect, Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] left his indelible mark on the intellectual history of Islaam as one of its greatest legal theorists. He died in Egypt at the age of fifty-three and was buried in al-Fustaat. Later, in 1211 CE, the Ayyubid ruler, Sultaan Afdal, built an impressive mausoleum, which still stands to this day, as a tribute to his memory.

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4) **Imaam Ahmad ibn Hambal** [rh]  
164 - 241 AH [780 - 855 CE]

Islaamic history is replete with scholars who distinguished themselves by the breadth of their learning and courage. These scholars were both pious and profoundly knowledgeable in Islaamic principles and practices, and they cared little about the wealth and material possessions of this world. They humbled themselves before their Creator in the darkness of the night, and continued their quest for knowledge and wisdom during the day. They also endured considerable personal and financial hardship, and were often made to suffer for their faith and conviction, but they never bowed before kings and tyrants. To them, the life of this world was like an illusion; without a reality of its own. The pursuit of the pleasure of Allaah and truth, justice, equality and the welfare of the poor and needy became their sole mission in life.

These were men of remarkable character, dynamic personality, profound courage and relentless determination. Such exemplary scholars appeared at various times in Islaamic history and they fulfilled their vocation with patience, perseverance and great success. Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] was one such towering scholar and reformer who emerged to defend Islaam at a critical time in Islaamic history, and thereby left his indelible mark in the annals of the history of the Ummah.

Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal al-Shaybaanii [rh] was born into the noble Arab tribe of Shaybaan. Ahmad's grandfather, Hanbal ibn Hilaal, occupied a prominent position as governor of the province of Sarakhs under the Umayyads, while his father, Muhammad, was a valiant warrior who participated in many a Jihaad (military expedition) led by the Umayyads and was martyred on the battlefield while he was in his thirties. Ahmad was about two years old when his father died, and he was brought up in dire poverty by his devout mother, Safiyyah. He attended his local schools and successfully committed the entire Qur'aan to memory before he was ten.

Influenced by his mother, Ahmad began to study hadiih at the age of sixteen and fell in love with the subject. He was not only a bright student, but also deeply religious during his early years. His scrupulous character and friendly personality endeared him to his teachers. During this period he worked as a clerk at his local post office to supplement his family's meagre income, and regularly drafted letters for the illiterate villagers free of charge. He thus combined his education in fiqh (Islaamic jurisprudence) and hadiih with his other activities under the guidance of the great Imaam Abuu Yuusuf Yaquub ibn Ibraahim [rh].

Imaam Abuu Yuusuf [rh] was one of the foremost students of Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh] and an outstanding Islaamic scholar and jurist in his own right. Like Imaam Abuu Haniifah [rh], Imaam Abuu Yuusuf [rh] emphasised the importance of scholarly discretion (ijtihaad) through analogical deduction (qiyaas), which was a key feature of Hanafii legal thought and methodology. Ahmad attended Imaam Abuu Yuusuf's [rh] lectures regularly and became thoroughly proficient in Hanafii fiqh.

He continued his studies of hadith and fiqh for another four years under the guidance of Haytham ibn Bishr [rh], who was one of the foremost scholars of hadith in Baghdad. As the political capital of the Muslim world and a thriving metropolis, Baghdad attracted some of Islaam's most prominent scholars. Eager to complete his education, Ahmad then attended the classes of luminaries like Abd al-Rahmaan ibn Mahdii [rh] and Abuu Bakr ibn 'Ayyaash [rh], and rapidly assimilated Islaamic knowledge and wisdom. His devotion, dedication and commitment to his studies, especially of the Prophetic hadith, was such that he often left his home well before the dawn prayer (Fajr) and waited for his teachers to arrive to begin the first class of the day.

Since Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's [rh] main preoccupation in life was the pursuit of knowledge, he happily travelled long distances in search of Islaamic knowledge and wisdom. As an honest and passionate student he was happy to spend his money and endure every hardship in his quest. He was not one of those who expected his teachers to come to him; rather he went out of his way to visit his teachers and learn from them. So much so that when he first met his tutor 'Abd ur-Razzaq ibn Hammaam [rh] in Makkah during the hajj, his colleague Yahyaa ibn Ma'iin [rh], the tutor of the celebrated Imaam al-Bukhaarii [rh], suggested they should start learning from him there and then. Imaam Ahmad [rh] disagreed with him and instead he travelled all the way to San'aa, the capital of Yemen, to study hadith under 'Abd ur-Razzaq [rh].

After completing his studies under the renowned scholars of Baghdad, he travelled to other major centres of Islaamic learning including Basrah, Kuufah, Makkah, Madiinah, Yemen and Syria, in pursuit of hadith. During his travels, he came into contact with Imaam Muhammad ibn Idriis ash-Shaafi'ii [rh], who was living in Makkah at the time. Although Ahmad was much younger than Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh], the latter was deeply impressed by his vast knowledge of Islaam. Many years later, these two luminaries of Islaam met again; this time in Baghdad. By then Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] had already developed his theories of Islaamic jurisprudence in a rigorous and systematic way. Likewise, Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] became widely recognised as an eminent scholar of hadith, having mastered all the nuances and intricacies of this subject under the tutelage of the Yemeni scholar 'Abd ur-Razzaq [rh], the author of the highly rated Musannaf.

Here in Baghdad, the two men regularly engaged in debate and discussion on the finer points of fiqh and hadith. Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] acknowledged Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's [rh] mastery in hadith, and regularly consulted him on difficult issues relating to hadith.

Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's [rh] collaboration with Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] proved extremely beneficial for him for a number of reasons. Hitherto he had been preoccupied with writing and memorising hadith and issues related to fiqh, but Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] helped him to develop a critical approach to these subjects. An outstanding analyst and synthesizer, Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] explained to him his theories of Islaamic jurisprudence, including all the intricacies involved in the construction and deduction of the principles of 'Usool ul-Fiqh, which enabled Imaam Ahmad [rh] to revisit the large quantity of hadith he had learned. His critical examination of hadith literature enabled him to ascertain their relevance to Islaamic law and legal theory. This represented a major turning point in Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's [rh] intellectual journey. He was now in a position to develop his own approach to fiqh, thanks to his colossal knowledge of hadith, the sayings of the Sahaabah and those of the Taabi'uun (Successors of the Sahaabah). Imaam Ahmad's [rh] mastery of both hadith and fiqh was publicly acknowledged by Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] himself when he said, "I am leaving Baghdad when there is none more pious, nor a greater jurist than Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh]." He was forty at the time.

Normally a scholar of Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's [rh] calibre and accomplishment would have established his own school long before he reached forty, but he refrained from doing so. Historians explain that he followed the Prophet Muhammad's [s] example; that is to say, since the Prophet [s] did not attain his Prophethood and propagate Islaam until he was forty, so Imaam Ahmad [rh] waited till he reached his fortieth birthday. Also, he chose not to teach while his own teachers were still alive, out of respect for them. Interestingly, Imaam ash-Shaafi'ii [rh] died in the very same year Imaam Ahmad [rh] turned forty.

Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] soon gathered a very large following around himself. Having suffered considerable financial hardship during his student days, he gave preference to the poor students, especially those who were not in a position to pay for their studies. It was not long before his reputation spread in and around Baghdad with thousands flocking to attend his lectures. Unflustered by the mass attention he now received, Imaam Ahmad [rh] continued to lead a simple and ascetic life, far removed from the luxuries and pomp of this world.

When any of his admirers sent him money or gifts, he gave them away to the poor and needy. On a number of occasions, even the Khaliif sent him valuable gifts, but he refused to accept them. When his sons asked him why he had refused, he explained that it was due to caution and his personal dislike for distinction.

So, like so many other great Islaamic scholars, Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] refused to accept favours or gifts, especially from the rulers of his time, and instead lived on an income from a small rental apartment he owned. When he ran out of money, which happened regularly, he would skip meals. On one occasion he was so poverty stricken that he could not afford to replace his old and worn out clothes, and when the locals offered to buy him new ones, he politely refused. Since his poverty and deprivation was self-imposed, Imaam Ahmad [rh] maintained his independence and dignity by not accepting anything without paying for it himself. Only when his situation became extremely desperate, did he accept small amounts of money, but always on the condition that he repaid it later.



Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] combined qualities that are always certain to ensure scholarly excellence - a sharp memory coupled with penetrative insight, endurance and perseverance, purity of heart and sincerity, a pleasant personality that combined poverty with generosity and dignity and self-respect with the willingness to forgive those who caused him harm and injury, and a willingness to undertake difficulties in the pursuit of his Islaamic goals. His exemplary character and profound insight into Islaamic teachings made him very popular with the masses in Baghdad.

Imaam Ahmad [rh] lived at a time when Mu'tazilism (philosophical rationalism) became the dominant creed of the Abbaasid Empire under the stewardship of Khaliif al-Ma'mun. As a champion of philosophical rationalism, the Khaliif and his immediate successors (Khaliifs Mu'tasim Billaah and al-Waathiq) not only turned Mu'tazilism into an official creed of the State, but Khaliifs Mu'tasim Billaah and al-Waathiq also imposed it on the people by force. After a fraudulent Khaliifal decree was issued which stipulated that all the scholars in Baghdad had to subscribe to the Mu'tazilite creed and anyone who refused to do so would be severely chastised, Imaam Ahmad's [rh] life was suddenly turned upside down.

The Mu'tazilites believed that the Qur'aan was created, contrary to the normative Islaamic view, which stated that the Qur'aan was the uncreated, eternal Word of Allaah. Not only did this belief contradict the clear affirmation of Allaah's speech in the Qur'aan, but more mischievously implied that just as the Qur'aan was created in time, as times change so too should its rulings. Aside from the danger this false belief posed to the survival of Islaam as a religion, it also opened the door to the rulers becoming absolute despots by changing the laws of Islaam to suit their own whims.

Most of the 'Ulamaa' (Islaamic scholars) flatly refused to accept the Khaliifal decree, but when they were threatened with severe chastisement and persecuted by the ruling Abbaasid elites, many of them pretended to subscribe to some aspects of the Mu'tazilite creed to avert any social upheaval and civil strife. Some 'Ulamaa' however continued to openly defy the Khaliifal decree, and Imaam Ahmad [rh] was one of them. When orders were eventually issued for all the defiant scholars to be brought to the Khaliif's palace in chains, they all eventually surrendered except one. That indomitable scholar was Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh].

It is very important to note that the main conspirator in the persecution of the 'Ulamaa' and in imposing the false beliefs of the Mu'tazilah on the masses was in-fact not Khaliif Ma'mun or his successors, but rather a Mu'tazilite by the name of Ahmad ibn abii Du'aad who was the minister of Khaliif Ma'mun. Ahmad ibn abii Du'aad fraudulently wrote letters in the name of the Khaliif while he was on his death-bed, instructing the authorities to arrest and interrogate the 'Ulamaa' of Islaam.

When Khaliif al-Ma'mun died, Ahmad ibn abii Du'aad further tricked Khaliif al-Ma'mun's brother and successor, Khaliif Mu'tasim Billah, into believing that Khaliif al-Ma'mun left two instructions to his successor – "...first, to persecute those who rejected belief in the createdness of the Qur'aan, and second to keep Ahmad ibn Abii Du'aad in

power as the prime minister...”. It was in fact Ahmad ibn Abii Du’aad’s idea, not Khaliif al-Ma’muun’s, that people should be forced by using the power of the state to adopt the Mu’tazilii belief, and that punishment and imprisonment should be employed to that end.

Khaliif Al-Mu’tasim was not a man of knowledge. He was a man of the sword, which he never put down. So unfortunately he left the complicated disputes on the controversy of the ‘createdness of the Qur’aan’ to Ibn Abii Du’aad to resolve.

Chained from head to toe, Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] was brought before Khaliif Mu’tasim Billah who interrogated him at the urging of Ibn Abii Du’aad for more than four days. The Khaliif insisted he change his views, but Imaam Ahmad [rh] remained steadfast. The battle between normative Islaam (Ahl-us-Sunnah wal-Jamaa’ah) and philosophical rationalism was in full force. When it became abundantly clear that Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] would not recant, his tormentors began to flog him until the whip broke into two. He was then dragged before the Khaliif for more questioning, but again he refused to budge an inch. The Khaliif then ordered his punishment be intensified. This time Imaam Ahmad [rh] was beaten to a state of unconsciousness, yet he remained as firm as ever, refusing to bow before the scourge of rationalism and the worship of the intellect, which at the time was threatening to undermine the very foundation of Islaam which emphasized the primacy of revelation over human intellect.

Imaam Ahmad’s [rh] brilliant defense of core Islaamic beliefs as well as his courage and bravery in the face of such barbarism began to win over his opponents. As expected, his name and fame spread across the Islaamic world like wildfire, and his contemporaries lavished much praise on him for championing normative Islaam and keeping the flame of true belief alive.

Al-Mu’tasim died soon thereafter and was succeeded by Khaliif al-Waathiq who similarly succumbed to the deception of Ahmad ibn Abii Du’aad. The persecution of the ‘Ulamaa’ continued unabated with the unwitting complicity of two Khaliif’s who were certainly not scholarly despite being powerful rulers.

Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] continued his struggle against the Mu’tazilites until, in 847, Khaliif Mutawakkil ‘ala-Allaah ascended the Abbaasid throne and reversed his predecessor’s harsh policies. Khaliif Mutawakkil ‘ala-Allaah understood the grave error of his predecessors. He respected and supported the ‘Ulamaa’ of Fiqh and Hadiith, among whom Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] was the leading figure. This was a time when the Imaam [rh] could have easily avenged himself against those who persecuted him, but he absolved them all of everything they did, seeking no revenge whatsoever.

Imaam Ahmad [rh] resumed his role of teaching Islaam and went on to write numerous books on Hadiith and Fiqh including his famous al-Musnad, which contains more than thirty thousand ahaadiith and a large selection of views and opinions of the Prophet’s [s] Companions about different aspects of Islaamic belief and practice.

Imaam Ahmad ibn Hanbal [rh] died in 885 CE at the age of seventy seven and was buried in Baghdad. After his death, a new school of Islaamic legal thought emerged named after him. The Hanbalii Madhhab is today followed mainly in Palestine and Arabia, but inspite of being the smallest Madhhab his religious ideas and thoughts have influenced generations of influential Islaamic scholars and reformers.



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